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OP-ED

## Why adult education must be kept alive

Budget cuts are threatening adult education and ESL. Even for the sake of boosting the worker tax base, the LAUSD shouldn't turn its back on more than a quarter-million students who value education and attend school of their own volition.



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Delaney Arrazola, 3, sits with a sign near her mom, Romina Bonilla, an ESL teacher at Huntington Park - Bell Community Adult School/Elizabeth Learning Center. They were among hundreds at the Van Nuys Government Center protesting planned cuts by LAUSD of adult education programs. (Los Angeles Times / April 27, 2012)

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By John McCormick

May 1, 2012

A little more than a year ago I retired from teaching adult school in Los Angeles. Since then, I'm embarrassed to admit I've forgotten most of the names of my students. But I certainly haven't forgotten the students themselves: the Guatemalan chef who wore a clean white shirt and tie to class every night; the twentysomething Cambodian woman who worked torturous hours in a doughnut shop and still found time to study, despite her obvious exhaustion; the older Korean man who knotted his long hair in a bun like a samurai

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and who wasn't afraid to sing "New York, New York" in front of the class.

During my 11 years in the classroom, I primarily taught English as a second language. I taught students who were illiterate not only in English but also in their native languages. I taught students whose grasp of English grammar was superior to mine. I taught teenagers. I taught 70-year-olds. And I taught every age in between. I taught in classrooms, in a community center, at a former public library, at a church and even a few times on the roof of a school.

The one constant in my teaching experience was the students. Each of them wanted an education and believed it would better their lives. By and large, my students worked long hours for low pay. Many rode the bus to and from school, which prolonged their already arduous days. Yet they came to class grateful for the opportunities that life in Los Angeles afforded them.

Now, owing to LAUSD's ongoing budget crisis and a change in how the state funds education, there is talk of drastically paring back adult education and ESL. The state used to provide funds to school districts that had to be specifically spent on adult education. Now that state money comes in a lump sum for districts to use as they see fit. Consequently, school districts throughout California are abandoning adult programs and redirecting the money that used to be spent on it to K-12 education.

But should LAUSD really turn its back on more than a quarter-million students who want and value education and attend school of their own volition? The repercussions of cutting or losing adult education would extend far beyond the staffs and students at the schools. Many local businesses, such as pharmacies, hire students who have been certified by adult school skill centers. High school dropouts return to adult school to get their diplomas. Eliminating adult schools would diminish the workforce. And people who make less money pay less in taxes, they spend less, and they often have to depend more on government to meet their basic needs.

Closing adult schools would also result in collateral damage to K-12 children. My students often attended the same schools at night that their children attended during the day. Because kids usually pick up English faster than their parents, if the parents don't learn the language, they become marginalized in their own families. They cannot communicate with teachers, help with homework or even understand what their kids are saying. So instead of being

able to help their kids assimilate, parents are more likely to remain isolated.

Los Angeles is a city of many, separate ethnic communities: Koreatown, Little Armenia, Thaitown, Little Bangladesh. From Mexico alone, immigrants represent many distinct cultures — Oaxacan, Sonoran, Yucatecan, etc. — and each has its own dialect and traditions. In a city so diverse, it's easy for foreign-born residents to remain isolated in their own communities, speaking only their native languages.

Adult schools require students to leave the comfort zones of their neighborhoods. In class, students from all over the world come together to learn English. And whether you're from China or Honduras, trying to master all our irregular verb forms and aberrant pronunciations is a bonding experience that ultimately builds bridges between diverse communities.

Obviously, times are tough, and school districts need to be pragmatic about their resources. But given the wealth of intelligence and ingenuity that exists within the administrative and teaching staffs of the school district, can't we collectively come up with a better solution than eviscerating adult education?



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John McCormick is a retired screenwriter and teacher living in Highland Park.

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